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TIDBITS

Tips and Helpful Links

Assessment Division

Guiding Instruction Through
Formative Assessments

As classroom teachers we constantly monitor and adjust our instruction based on interactions, observations, and student responses to our instruction. When things don't progress as planned, we probe to pinpoint the difficulty, then try a different approach or provide greater detail. We continually check for understanding throughout the lesson using interactive, real-time techniques that allow us to adjust the presentation or provide alternative avenues for students to express what they've learned.

Taken further, these teacher actions can become formative assessments. The difference is that formative assessments are intentional and systematic, having specific objectives in mind and recording information both for lesson adjustments and documentation of student progress. According to Gallagher & Worth (2008), formative assessments have multiple purposes:

- to help teachers target instruction that meets specific learning goals
- support student learning
- check for progress and detect learning gains
- identify strengths and weaknesses
- check for misconceptions following instruction
- differentiate instruction
- evaluate the effectiveness of instructional methods or programs
- to transform curriculums

While summative assessments are often referred to as "snapshots" or assessments of learning, formative assessments more closely resemble a "photo album" (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006), or assessments for learning. The Arizona College and Career Ready Standards are fewer and deeper than our former standards, allowing time for more formative measures and giving students the opportunity to

interact meaningfully with new information, reflect on it, and integrate new knowledge.

According to Heritage (2007), formative assessments fall into three broad strategies:

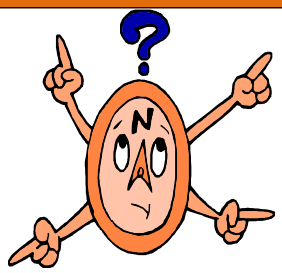
- "On-the-fly," in the sense that the teacher changes course during a lesson to address misconceptions before proceeding with the designed instructional sequence.
- "Planned-for interaction," where the teacher decides beforehand how he or she will draw out students' thinking during the course of instruction.
- "Curriculum-embedded," where tools and activities are embedded in the ongoing curriculum to garner feedback at key points in the learning process. Examples of curriculum-embedded assessments might include journaling on a particular scientific topic or identifying real-life examples and non-examples of geometric shapes to demonstrate understanding.

"All three assessment strategies share several characteristics that, when considered together, make them unique to other assessments. Specifically, these types of formative assessments are planned activities, purposefully implemented to gather evidence of learning. They are conducted unobtrusively as a natural part of the instructional activity, and "short-cycle," occurring during a lesson or unit of study and providing near-immediate feedback to the teacher."

(Source: *Connecting Formative Assessment Research to Practice*, Learning Point Associates, December 2009)

Formative assessments guide daily instruction by helping teachers identify gaps in learning. The information gleaned from formatives allows teachers to differentiate instruction based on individual needs and preferences. Adjustments can be made depending on the task difficulty in relation to varied student abilities. Planning for instruction using UDL techniques can minimize the need for these adjustments and re-teaching.

Formative assessments provide a platform for continual communication between students and teachers, and by providing gap-related feedback to students at critical junctures; it helps them quickly resume their trajectory toward mastery. By working in collaboration with students using formative assessments along with learning progressions, rubrics with models, necessary scaffolding, and clearly defined performance expectations as reference points, students develop the metacognitive skills that better position them to conduct self-evaluations and recognize when they need assistance. They begin to take charge of their learning and build confidence and positive attitudes.



Include body language and engagement as well as how the student interacts with materials as part of evaluating progress toward the objective. Students who look uncomfortable or confused can be asked specific questions about the content or activity to reveal problems or misconceptions. On the spot resolution of difficulties can eliminate bumps in the road and keep the student moving forward.

Formative assessments can be designed in many ways. Graphic organizers can be used to synthesize information, showing how new learning has been organized and connected. Collaborative activities reveal students' grasp of the content and can encompass learning preferences as students develop and demonstrate understanding. Taking the time to reflect on new learning by composing a summary helps students increase their metacognitive skills, making sense of and deriving personal meaning from what they've seen and heard. Students may prefer to include visuals along with text to increase memory and aid in retrieval. Offering options such as these are consistent with Universal Design for Learning and address the range of abilities and preferences in your classroom.

Some type of formative measure can be used every day to continually evaluate student movement toward mastery. Using multiple measures of varying types provides a more accurate picture of what students know and understand. Some teachers use exit cards to inform them of necessary adjustments for subsequent instruction. Using these students may respond to a question, solve a problem, or summarize their understanding. Teachers then sort responses into groups: students who need re-teaching, those who are ready to move on, and those who need an even greater challenge. Deciding who needs immediate attention and who needs a different approach, as well as noting which students are not being sufficiently challenged, will inform your instruction going forward. For greater engagement, design lessons with a tier of activities composed of two or three levels and include different approaches that incorporate learning styles and preferences. A variety of measures such as a collection of work samples, photographs or video of projects, student journals/summaries/reflections – any evidence of the student's cognitive processes – can be utilized in formative assessment.

Develop a systematic way of keeping track of the data you collect. Some teachers use a clipboard or sticky notes as they move throughout the room, noting skill acquisition or any confusion they observe. These notes are then transferred to individual folders kept on each student and used for 1:1 conferencing, IEP updates, and differentiation in lesson planning. Individual folders can also contain useful information on strengths, weaknesses, and personal preferences.

Another option is keeping a class list on a clipboard and coding next to the students' names to indicate their level of proficiency with a particular skill or

enlarging a seating chart to take notes on students as the lesson progresses. Developing a working database for students on your caseload will provide you with a convenient reference for lesson planning and tracking progress. Systematic data collection will provide precise information for quarterly IEP reports and talking points as you review student progress with classroom teachers and parents. A chart can be developed to monitor IEP objectives, such as the one below, where opportunities to demonstrate mastery and the number of successes can be tallied to come up with a percentage indicator:

The nature of the information a teacher collects may change at any time depending on what's considered valuable. Design charts or systems to collect whatever evidence is necessary to make data-driven decisions in planning subsequent instruction. These tools can also be useful in facilitating collaborative planning between special and general education teachers by providing discussion points and guidance on student preferences, pacing of instruction, and the need for re-teaching or an alternative approach.

Student	Date	Objective	Opportunity	Met Criteria	%
Alicia	10/21	Identify main character	///	///	100
		Describe story setting	//	/	50
		Use Table of Contents	////	////	100
Joey	10/21	Categorize objects	////	///	75

For more ideas on formatives and templates to collect information, see:

http://www.marylandlearninglinks.org/939/resources_sub:detail/resource_id:17301/

For vignettes illustrating a variety of formative techniques:

http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2008/Formative_Assessment_Examples_2008.pdf

This link contains a list of various formative assessments with brief descriptions for implementation:

http://www.aft.org/pdfs/teachers/teach11materials/t11_providingh3.pdf

Incorporate technology into your formative data collection with tools found here:

http://www.nwea.org/blog/2013/digital-technology-tools-for-implementing-formative-assessment-post-one/

Contact Us:

Alternate Assessment phone number: 602.542.8239
Email address: AssessingSWDs@azed.gov

Leila Williams, Ph.D., Associate Superintendent of Assessment & Accountability Leila.Williams@azed.gov
Audra Ahumada, Director of Alternate Assessment Audra.Ahumada@azed.gov
Sheila Wells-Moreaux, Ph.D., AIMS A Coordinator Sheila.Wells-Moreaux@azed.gov
Patricia Reynolds, Prof. Dev. & State Assessment Specialist Patricia.Reynolds@azed.gov
Angeles Swasey, Program Project Specialist Angeles.Swasey@azed.gov